

Fast And Frightening

A Film by Clint Anderson Art by DearDMV



Fast and Frightening by Thei

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (for a little while), (not anyone we care about though!), Art, Billy Hargrove Lives, Gen, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Kinda, Neil Hargrove dies, alternate season 3, and guess what - people aren't the only thing the mindflayer can make copies of, Billy being chained up, Billy is being taken on the ride of his life, Billy is traumatized, but he's not having fun, but still being a good babysitter, hunger, Max is sad, non-consensual mind-fuckery, possessed car, remember that doppelganger? yeah so do I, some violence (not a lot), Steve is traumatized too, the Camaro has an evil twin too, thirst, unwillingly, what else ummm

Language: English

Characters: (mentioned), Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, The Mindflayer, The Party (Stranger Things)

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Neil Hargrove, Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington & Maxine "Max" Mayfield

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-04-23

Updated: 2021-04-26

Packaged: 2022-04-01 01:10:03

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 4

Words: 20,840

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

There's some *seriously* fucked-up shit going on.

Billy crashed his car, was attacked by some kind of monster, escaped, ran into someone who looked *just like him*, punched that guy in the face, escaped again, and ended up on a random road somewhere outside of town.

And now his own car has turned against him.

In short, Billy's not having a good time.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- Inspired by [Beth \(Or Why You Should Never Go See Stephen King's Christine At A Drive-In Theater\)](#) by [Aubrie1234](#).

Some days, you just need to write about Billy Hargrove being tied up, you know?

This whole thing started when me and DearDMVZ started talking about possessed cars and cool movie-chase scenes (and also that Ship's Mast scene in Death Proof), and that's how we discovered that we both had a mighty need of having Billy tied to the hood of the Camaro while it's racing down small-town roads, full-speed, because apparently we're both deprived like that.

And then this was born. Basically a what-if fic, as in *What if the Mindflayer could also clone/possess cars?* and also *That copy of Billy that he saw could and should have been used more in the show*, and then those what-ifs turned into a car chase which turned into a fic.

Credit for the tied-up-with-belts-thing goes to to [Aubrie1234](#), whose story (linked above) was basically the reason why we started discussing this topic at all (because yes to Billy tied up with belts, and also in general).

Everything that concerns cars and sounds more complicated than "stepping on the gas" is probably written largely by [DearDMVZ](#) (since my car knowledge is severely lacking, and even more so in English), and they also did the amazing cover art below.

Fast And Frightening

A Film by *Wend Anderson* Art by *DearDMVZ*



(Illustration by [DearDMVZ](#))

Billy doesn't know what the *hell* is happening, but he knows there's some *seriously* fucked-up shit going on. Either that, or he knocked himself out in the crash, and this is all some kind of dream, or hallucination. Perhaps he's in a coma, and doomed to live through this nightmare until he wakes up.

God, Billy hopes he wakes up soon.

Something tells him that he won't, though, because he's in *actual pain*, and he wouldn't feel anything if it was a dream, would he? If it was just a dream, his head wouldn't hurt so much. There wouldn't be blood dripping down the side of his face from where his head hit the steering wheel; his body wouldn't ache from where he was dragged down the stairs; his fingers wouldn't be bloody from trying to stop his descent; his throat wouldn't be raw from the horror that latched onto his face and pressed past his lips to forcefully silence his screams.

He doesn't know how long he was down there – doesn't know if it actually *happened*, doesn't know what that thing *was*, doesn't understand the images and sounds that are flashing in and out of his brain now like the world's shittiest TV-reception – but he got away. He doesn't remember how, just knows that he kicked out, somehow wriggled out from under it and ran. Scrambled up the same stairs he'd been dragged down, his aching hands holding on to the steps and to the railing so he wouldn't stumble or fall.

When he got out, his car was there, right where he left her. His first instinct was to run for her, get in and fucking floor it, but when he got closer he realized that she was right where he left her – and *just* as he left her; banged up from the crash, broken windshield, dents on the hood. She didn't start earlier, and Billy couldn't waste time on trying to get her to start now. If she didn't start, he'd be dead.

So he ran, instead. Found a phone booth not too far from there, and was just about to call for help when he saw someone approaching. Just a shadow in the darkness at first, and he was just about to yell for help, because the damn phone didn't work ... But then whoever it was got closer, and Billy felt his throat close up in terror.

Because that was *him*. Him, Billy Hargrove – but without the blood and the grime and the terror.

It *couldn't* be. Wasn't possible. So Billy did the first thing he could think of – he punched himself in the face and fled. He could hear the sound of someone running after him, and knew that he wouldn't make it out on the road – that he wouldn't be able to outrun whatever that was that was wearing his face – so he veered off into the woods and continued running.

He's still running, now. Stumbling in the dark woods, slipping on roots and smacking branches and twigs out of his face, breathing hard and being terrified that whatever it was, is still after him. Wishing that he'll *wake the fuck up*.

Eventually he staggers out onto a smooth surface. Asphalt. Another road. It's empty in both directions, but he doesn't recognize it and he has no idea where it leads. There are no signs, no landmarks, nothing to tell him which way to go for help and safety.

He holds his breath and listens. Everything is silent. No one is following him anymore, at least. Just as he leans forward, hands on his knees to try to catch his breath, he hears a sound. A familiar sound; the rumbling of an engine. It's distant, but coming closer.

By the time he can see the headlights of the oncoming car, he's stepped out into the middle of the road, and is waving his arms around.

“Stop!” he yells, hoarsely, ignoring the pain in his throat and the reason for it. “Please, stop! I need help!”

The car slows down, and stops a short distance away. He shields his eyes against the glare of the headlights and waits for someone to exit the car and ask what is going on. But no one does. The only thing he can hear is the rumble of the engine and his own harsh breathing. Slowly, he lowers his hand and squints against the lights. Blinks twice, and sidesteps to get a better look.

What he sees makes him gasp. The car isn't just any car. It's the Camaro – *his* Camaro. And the driver's seat is empty.

But ... *how*? He left his car at the site of the crash – damaged, cracked, and most importantly *not running*. Yet here she is now,

whole and undamaged, engine purring in a way he recognizes well. It sounds like safety, yet there is something very wrong with all of this. How can she have shown up here undamaged, when he's still bleeding from the crash that broke her? How is she here, when no one is driving?

Carefully, he makes his way around to the driver's side. The window is rolled down on both sides of the car, but there is no sign of a person inside. The car is running, the radio's buzzing low like it does before he can find a station and the car is put in park ... but no one is here.

"He-hello?" he says, and hates how he stutters.

No one answers, of course, because *no one is here*. Tentatively, he leans closer and peers inside. As he does, the engine revs, and he catches sight of the gas pedal being pushed down by itself. He reaches for the door, but it locks before he can reach the door handle, keeping him out. He freezes like that, with his left hand extended; eyes wide. When he reaches inside and under the steering wheel, hoping to turn the key and shut the engine off, he does so hesitantly – trying to prepare himself for whatever will happen next.

Nothing prepares him for what *does* happen, though. For the way the window rolls up, too fast for him to have time to pull his arm back. It traps his left arm in the car, the glass digging into his jacket and the flesh of his arm. He yells and tries to pull away, but the window rolls up a bit further, making him scream. He stills, then, afraid that any further struggles will break his arm. As he's standing there, leaning against the car and breathing through his nose, he feels something slither around his wrist inside the car. Whatever it is rounds his wrist once, twice, three times before it pulls tight to the point beyond discomfort. Billy hisses and tries to peer inside, and that's when the window decides to release him. It rolls down, revealing that the driver's side seat belt has been wrapped around his wrist. Experimentally tugging on it, he almost loses his footing when the seatbelt pulls him forward without warning. He tugs on it again, frightened now, but it does not yield an inch, only tightens against his skin.

"Ah, fuck!" he hisses, because it's too tight.

The car – because it's *the car*, there's no other explanation, and *how the fuck can it be the car?* – answers by rolling forward. Billy, stuck as he is, has no choice but to stumble along. He's so surprised by it that he almost falls, and his instinctive reaction is to bang on the roof, hard.

All of a sudden, the car door is thrown open and pushes him out from the car. It knocks the air out of him and forces him back. His arm is still tied up, through the open window, but the belt gives enough that it doesn't tear his arm off.

Then the gear stick shifts up into first gear, and the car drives forward again, revving its engine.

"Oh no," Billy says, realizing what is about to happen. "No no no no no ..."

But it's no use. The car doesn't stop this time, keeps rolling forward, forcing Billy to back up, fast, to avoid getting knocked over or dragged along. When it picks up speed, he can't do anything but jump up on the windshield. The car door closes and he only narrowly avoids getting his fingers crushed. His hand is still trapped, but at least the belt has enough give now that he can hold on to the ledge of the roof where the window is cracked enough so he can hook in his fingers – and he needs it. The speed is steadily increasing, and it's all he can do to hold on for dear life, with both hands. His Converse are scrabbling over the hood without getting purchase.

"Shit!" He swears when the car swerves to the side, throwing him around so that he's splayed out on his back over the windshield. He hits the back of his head and the impact makes him bite his tongue. He tastes blood in his mouth before the stars recede from his vision and he realizes that they're still going, faster and faster. He hears – or maybe imagines – the clicking of the gearshift, the leather coated stick moving up a notch as it gets to speed; allowing Billy to anticipate the next upshift by the car's familiar whine. Begging to be shifted so it can go faster.

"What the fuck, what the *fuck* ..." Panicking now, because *this can't be happening*, he instinctively grabs onto the other side of the roof to avoid getting thrown off. It's only when he feels something slide

around his other wrist too that he realizes his mistake. He immediately tries to yank his hand back, but the belt that has just trapped his other wrist tightens like the first one, and pulls back at the same time as the other one does.

Billy screams as he's dragged back over the windshield and the restraints around his wrists are pulled tight. He kicks his legs out, but there's nothing there to hit, and when he raises his head up the speed makes his eyes tear up. His heart is in his throat and he struggles futilely against his bonds. The car answers by speeding up to whine again and gearing up, going even faster. The terror in his chest bubbles up, and Billy finds himself begging – to who or what, he does not know.

“Please! Slow down, please *stop!*”

The car lurches to the side, and his weight is thrown to the side in turn. His whole lower body is off the side of the car for a couple of petrifying seconds that feel like forever, and Billy lets out a wordless yell. The motion pulls on his shoulder painfully, but he can barely feel it over the way his heart is trying to beat out of his chest.

“*Please!*” he screams.

As if whatever is causing this decides to take mercy on him, it lurches in the other direction so he's thrown back onto the car. His bonds slacken. Not the grip around his wrists, but the belts at least give enough slack so that he can slide down from the windshield and onto the hood. Hook the heels of his shoes into the front of the car for some kind of purchase; one in the grill, one over the narrow edge of the headlight. Just in time, too. As soon as he is as secure as he's going to get, the engine whines again, ghost driver bumping up to a higher gear, and shoots off in the night.

And Billy screams.

Steve doesn't know why he can't sleep. He's been sleeping better after graduating, maybe because he's no longer under the pressure of getting passing grades. But the last couple of nights, he hasn't slept more than a couple of hours at a time. He's been too warm, too cold,

too thirsty – you name it. Every time he goes to bed he’s tossing and turning until he’s passing out from sheer exhaustion. Even Robin at work has noticed. Keeps adding tallies to the “you suck” portion of her board when he messes up.

Tonight, he forgoes tossing and turning entirely. It’s a Saturday and he has work tomorrow, but aimlessly driving around Hawkins is better than lying in bed and staring up into the ceiling while counting down the hours until he has to get up and get ready for work.

He’s on one of those long stretches of road that lead out of Hawkins, far out of town and with only woods on either side, when he sees the headlights in front of him. He slows down and makes sure he’s keeping in his lane – but the other driver certainly doesn’t. The car flashes past him fast enough that he only barely has time to register two things: one, that was *Billy Hargrove’s* car, and two – it almost looked like ... it looked like someone was on the hood of the car!

But that doesn’t make any sense. He blinks, and brakes abruptly in the middle of the road. Throwing the door open, he gets out of the car in time to see the tail lights of the Camaro disappear around a bend in the road. And just in time to hear the screaming.

Someone *is* on the hood of that car!

Steve finds himself back in his car before he’s even aware of it, making a U-turn and speeding after the Camaro.

It’s going *fast*, but it’s not really a surprise. Everyone knows that Billy Hargrove is a reckless driver. Steve would never have thought that he’d actually risk someone’s *life* like this, though. He wonders how he’ll manage to make him stop once he catches up, and all too soon – and still without much of a plan – he’s closing in.

Having lived in Hawkins all his life, Steve knows these roads. He knows when they’re coming up on a long stretch of road without any turns, and he uses this knowledge to turn the wheel and floor it so that he pulls up next to the Camaro. He doesn’t know what his plan is, exactly, but it involves making sure that whoever’s on top of the car is okay, and then making Hargrove pull over, possibly with the help of hand gestures and facial expressions since he doesn’t want to

risk causing an accident by ramming into the other car.

His plan goes straight out the window when he looks over and sees *no one* in the driver's seat, and ragged-looking Billy Hargrove himself on the hood of the car, with a desperate grip on the seatbelts to avoid being thrown off. Steve just has time to wonder if this is some kind of California thing, some kind of dare or something, when Hargrove turns his head sideways and locks eyes with Steve.

Steve flinches, and the BMW swerves dangerously. From what little Steve can see in the darkness, Hargrove looks terrified. Steve can see the whites of his eyes, and his teeth when he opens his mouth and screams.

Steve can't make out any words, but there's no mistaking the fear on the other boy's face. He's flattened against the hood and the windshield, arms and legs splayed out across the car. As Steve watches, he loses footing with one shoe, and scrambles to regain his foothold. Steve looks back at his face – it's streaked with something dark. Is that *blood*?

"Hey, pull over!" he yells at whoever's driving. They must be hunkered down, which is very dangerous for all of them, because they won't be able to see the road like that. Steve knows these roads like the back of his hand, but not even he would be able to drive them blind.

There's another problem, too. He knows that there's a curve coming up real soon, and they won't make it at these speeds.

"Stop the car!" he tries. But either the person driving can't hear him through Steve's closed window and over the sound of the engines, or they simply don't care – because if anything, they seem to be increasing their speed.

"Pull over!" he yells again, and turns his wheel, just a little, to the side. His car knocks into the Camaro. It was meant to be a small bump, as a threat, but at these speeds it still makes it hard to keep the car under control. Steve swears and has to spend a couple of tense seconds making sure he doesn't crash, and when he dares to glance back at the Camaro, he sees Hargrove's face. His hair is

whipping around him, but he is facing Steve and Steve can clearly see how he's shaking his head, mouthing 'no'. Eyes wide, face pale in the darkness.

The Camaro roars, as if enraged at Steve's audacity. It sounds as if a beast of hell is coming out of its motor – almost otherworldly.

It picks up speed, suddenly; pulls ahead for a moment, then twists. Steve swerves, but too late. The large back driver's side tires of the Camaro slam into the BMW's door, and Steve lets out a startled shriek at the attack. The car moves away after a few seconds, and when he looks up he sees Hargrove's legs shifting on the hood as it pulls away.

The scare was enough to distract him from a bigger problem – they're approaching the curve, and fast. He hadn't even realized how fast they were going or how quickly it would come up. The Camaro abruptly slows down and drops behind him, leaving Steve to take a backroad turn at deadly speeds. He grips the wheel hard and slams on the brake, praying to whoever's listening and turning as if his life depends on it – which it *does*. The car's wheels squeal as they almost slide off the road, but then – miracle of miracles – they somehow regain their hold. He makes it around the corner, barely.

He doesn't have time to breathe out a sigh of relief before he hears the Camaro roar again, this time from behind him. His eyes whip up to the rearview mirror as he sees it take the curve too, Hargrove sliding across the hood, kicking his legs. The guy is gripping to his precious car for dear life as they go around the bend, making it with ease, before the car straightens out and launches itself forward.

It gains speed faster than Steve would have thought possible, and suddenly it's pulling up on his passenger side, and they're neck to neck. Hargrove is plastered to the front of his car, fingers in a death grip on the roof, and his heels digging into the front of the hood in an attempt not to slide off.

"Hold on!" Steve yells, pointlessly, trying to think up some kind of plan. The Camaro's engine cuts him off again though, and he is jolted in his seat as the other car's door panel smack into the BMW. The sounds of metal scraping against metal fill his ears as the Camaro is

trying to push him off the road, leaning heavily into him. Steve does the first thing that comes to mind and slams on the brakes, the car slipping backwards as the Camaro goes on, taking one of Steve's mirrors off as it roars past.

As if the sudden loss of its partner disorients it, the muscle car pulls ahead and veers to the side before it rights itself, slowing down.

For a moment, Steve dares to believe that it's over. The Camaro slows down in front of him, brake lights coming on and engine simmering down as it begins to roll forward on momentum alone. Steve's heart is racing, but surely this is the end? Whoever's driving it will get out now, maybe see the burgundy stripe down the car's side and start yelling, or run. Hargrove will jump off the hood, and –

And then suddenly the shifter is moving again, and Hargrove screams. "*Steve!*"

It's the only thing Steve catches before a monstrous sound emanates from the car. It's horrifying; like a bear's roar mixed with a dragstrip car slamming on the gas – it sounds like a *creature*, rather than a machine. And it's coming from the Camaro, which is now launching off down the road ... with Hargrove still tied to it.

Steve has fought *monsters*. That's the only explanation he can give as to why he slams on the gas to follow, without hesitation. Adrenaline takes over, his mind goes blank, and his only focus is the car in front of him. Hargrove is an asshole, but he doesn't deserve *this*, whatever it is. Steve can hear his terror-filled voice echo in his head, begging for help, and he thinks of the fear in his eyes.

He goes *faster*.

He's never felt the need to know how fast his car can go, but now he's going to find out. His eyes are trained on the glowing tail lights ahead. The trees have given way to wheat fields on either side, whipping past too fast to be anything but a blur as the two cars race down the roads on the edge of town at 3 am.

When he comes up alongside the Camaro, he takes a second to flip it off, and then he takes a deep breath and chances a move that only

has a small chance of succeeding. He slams on the brake before letting off, just enough to make it to the back of the Camaro, and then slams on the gas again. Turning the wheel so he goes straight into the back tire, he smashes into it with the front headlights – intending to smash in the tire and force the car to stop. The car wiggles and pulls forward as Steve is forced to move away, leaving the Camaro trying to regain its footing again. Steve is just about to try again, getting back up against the car, when the Camaro's door flies open.

Steve turns in shock, foot instinctively letting up off the gas as he looks inside, eyes wide.

There is no driver.

Steve doesn't have time to think about what that means before the Camaro's rear rams into him, hard. It sends the BMW spinning on the road, and Steve swears and steps on the brakes, frantically trying to regain control. It doesn't do much, the car just squealing as it's sliding across the road, the Camaro pulling out and speeding on before he can take it down with him.

Suddenly he slides off of the road, hitting some sort of bump before he's mowing through a field. It only takes a few moments for the car's momentum to decrease to a stop, tipping up slightly as the weight shifts before it comes back down. He hears a thick sound of something mud-like being slapped by the tire, splattering up the wheel and its well.

Great.

Steve's on autopilot as he gets out of the car, legs shaking and muscles faltering a little as he steps out and lands ankle deep in cow shit and mud, the squelch of it making him groan. Rest in peace his Nikes. His neck hurts and his heart is beating like a drum, but he's alive and unharmed, even if the same cannot be said about his car or

–

– or Hargrove. *Shit.*

He grabs the door and peers over the roof of his crashed BMW,

staring down the road. He just has time to see the Camaro's tail lights disappear around the bend and be swallowed up by darkness.

2. Chapter 2

If he could catch his breath, Billy would be sobbing. As it is, all he can do is press his face down against the glass of the windshield and screw his eyes shut as the car's engine roars underneath him and wind whistles past his ears. He was jostled painfully when the Camaro slammed into the side of Harrington's car, and he heard the screech of tires when it disappeared from his view. He didn't hear the crash itself, but that might be because he was too busy screaming, or because the Camaro chose that moment to rev its engine and increase its speed even more. Leaving the other car in the dust like a hit and run.

He lets a whimper escape, and allows the wind to carry it away. He doesn't know what the fuck is going on, but he knows that Harrington, out of all people, just tried to help him, and probably died for it.

"Please," he whispers. "Please, please, please ..."

He doesn't know what he's begging for anymore, as the Camaro carries him off into the dark; blurry shapes of fields and trees whipping past on each side. The speed is slightly slower now, the engine settling on a purr as it drives through the night, Billy's adrenaline dying down a tad and allowing him to feel the heat from the motor through the warming hood.

He's barely aware of it when they start slowing down more. It's not until he hears the gears shift down that he blinks his eyes open. What he sees makes him let out a sob; they're back at the crash site. The old steel works building emerges on the side of the road; in some sick display of power, the Camaro took him on the ride of his life to show off only to take him back here. Back to where a monster dragged him down the stairs and crushed him under its weight, covered his face with something fleshy with teeth, and forced its way down his throat until he couldn't breathe, couldn't scream, couldn't fucking *think*.

Billy starts pulling at his bonds again, more desperate than before; hands curling back into fists and his nails digging into his palms. It's not even surprising when the belts tighten and pull him back so that

his arms and shoulders are achingly stretched out across the roof and the rest of him is splayed out over the windshield and hood. His feet no longer reach the front of the car, and he places them flat on the hood and bucks up in an effort to gain some leverage.

In retaliation, the car brakes abruptly, throwing him forward and making him lose his grip. At the same time, his bonds tighten and pull his wrists back, causing him to let out another hoarse scream as it makes his shoulders feel as if they're being dislocated.

The car eventually comes to a stop, and it's not until then that he realizes that they drove around to the back of the building and down a ramp into a basement type area. It's not the same place he was earlier; this place is smaller, the ceiling is lower, and there's no terrifying monster here ... But it's just as dark. There are no windows, no lights are on. It's not quite pitch black, but he can only barely see the outlines of pipes running along the ceiling, and a darker part of the wall that might be an opening.

The gears shift down, back to park, and the engine cuts off. Everything stills.

In the sudden silence, Billy's ragged breaths are prominent. And when he slumps against the car and starts crying, there are no engine noises to hide it; no wind to whip away the tears from his face.

He wishes he would wake up.

But he doesn't – because there's nothing to wake up from. Somehow, this is reality.

His whole body is hurting, and he doesn't understand what's happening. Doesn't understand anything of what he's seen tonight, of what he's been through. He wants to go *home*. Home to the house on Cherry Lane, to be chewed out by Neil. Or home to the run-down little house they had in California. Just, anywhere but here.

Suddenly a hand touches his face, and he flinches, hard. He opens his eyes and when he's blinked a couple of times to try to adjust to the darkness he finds himself staring back at *himself*; the copy of himself that he saw before, the one that he punched. He tries to draw back

from it, but he's still tied down so hard that he can't feel his fingers anymore, and he can't get away when the thing reaches out again.

"No!" Billy breathes and twists his head to the side to escape it. The copy doesn't stop. It grabs his face in a bruising grip with one hand, and gently – too gently – drags a finger down his tear-stained cheek with the other.

As Billy watches, the thing before him inspects the wetness on his finger, before popping it into its mouth. It releases Billy's face, which gives Billy enough confidence to speak.

"What are you?" He didn't expect his voice to sound so steady.

"We are you," the thing replies, sounding too much like him but also *wrong wrong wrong*. Belatedly, as if it forgot, the thing smiles. The insincere and too-wide smile that Billy uses just before he throws a punch. The one that says 'you're in trouble'. Billy gulps, and doesn't notice when he starts shaking his head.

"What do you want from me?"

This time, the thing's smile is timed right, and seems to fit its face better. It's as if it's trying it out. Like a suit. Ironing out the wrinkles. "We already have what we want from you."

It won't work, Billy *knows* it won't work, but he tries anyway. "Then let me go." His voice is small. Weak. He hates himself for it. "*Please.*"

The thing wearing his face shakes its head, golden curls bouncing at the sides of its face as they do when Billy has spent half an hour perfecting them. "No."

Billy pulls at his bonds again in frustration. The thing just watches him, as if he's a bug to be studied. Desperate now, Billy contorts himself and aims a kick at the thing. It's awkward and the angle is wrong since it's standing next to him, but he manages to nudge the thing's arm. He has half a second to feel satisfaction, before it grabs his ankle and slams it down against the side of the car, hard enough to make a dent. The motion twists Billy's knee and wrenches a scream out of him, and the thing waits a couple of seconds before it

releases its hold, and watches with detached disinterest as Billy shakily pulls his leg back, grits his teeth and tries to angle it away from the thing – as if it couldn't reach him if it tried. It's not like Billy can go anywhere.

There are tears running down Billy's face again, and he can't stop them. "I don't understand," he sobs. "I don't understand what you want!"

The thing wearing his face leans in closer. Billy wants to draw away, but he can't, he can't move. Instead he can only watch as the thing reaches for his face again.

"That's okay," it says, and there's amusement in its voice, tinted with sarcasm. Billy has heard himself use that specific tone of voice countless times. "You don't have to understand."

It pats Billy's cheek condescendingly, too hard to be friendly but not hard enough to leave marks. Then it turns to leave.

"No, please!" Billy calls after it. He can't say why; he doesn't want it to touch him again and he doesn't want to *be here*, but he also doesn't want to be left in the dark, quite literally. "Tell me what's going *on*!"

The thing doesn't reply. It walks away and out of Billy's field of vision, and no matter how he cranes his neck he can't see where it went. The steps recede and soon there is only silence once more.

And Billy is left there, in the dark.

Steve got a measly two hours of sleep that night, and it's not even *close* to being enough. He wakes up with a headache from hell, probably caused by the crash somehow, and for a moment he's not sure what is real. Did he dream the whole thing? But no. He learns, when he rolls out of bed and groans at the pain of it, that he most definitely did not dream it. He's got the bruises to prove it; on his chest from where he hit the steering wheel, and on his side from the center console.

Stumbling into the bathroom, he goes through the memories from

last night. He was lucky, in that he only went into a manure filled field and hit a pothole on the way in that bent his front passenger rim. His car is one mirror short, scratched up as all hell and covered in shit – and he's pretty sure he busted the lights – but at least it started and he managed to get it back on the road and drive it home, even though it felt like he had a rock for a tire on each wheel turn. He parked it in the garage, out of sight of the street as to avoid questions from the neighbors. He knows he has to have it looked at before he drives it again, which means that he needs a ride to work today.

He looks at his bruised chest in the bathroom mirror and frowns. There's something else that he needs to do though, before he does anything else.

After calling Robin and asking her to pick him up at Hawkins' Community Pool twenty minutes before their shift starts – which she only agrees to do after he tells her that he was in a car accident the previous night – he showers, gets dressed and makes a sloppy sandwich which he eats on the walk over.

Hawkins' Community Pool isn't too far away, half an hour's walk at most, and it's a nice day. Sunny, warm. Too bright for his headache, though. He wishes he'd thought to bring his sunglasses.

He gets there ten minutes after they've opened, but there are already a lot of people there. He searches the parking lot for a familiar car, and finally finds the Camaro parked in the shade under the trees to the side of the parking lot, where the employees park. No one notices him as he slowly makes his way around the car. There is nothing about it to suggest that whatever he saw last night really happened. The Camaro rammed into him, and while his BMW shows signs of blue paint on the side where it's dented, this car right here doesn't have a scratch on it. Could it have been another blue Camaro – somehow here, in little Hawkins?

He runs his fingers over the surface of the car, and his finger comes away dry, if a bit dusty. No one could have fixed up the kind of damage that it should have sustained so fast – not in a matter of hours.

So what the hell did he see?

To make sure, since he's already here, he pays the admission and enters the pool area. As soon as he does, he feels silly. He didn't bring a towel, and he's not in swim trunks. He's in his Scoops uniform, hiding it as much as he can under a light jacket, and sweating buckets because of it. He gets many strange looks, but shakes them off.

He needs to make sure.

And suddenly, there he is. Billy Hargrove, whole and unharmed, wearing red shorts and flip-flops and a tan and nothing else, talking to another lifeguard. A girl that Steve vaguely remembers from school.

Hargrove doesn't seem to be hurt. There's no blood on his face, no marks around his wrists. He doesn't look like he spent the night strapped to a speeding car without a driver. He's all tanned, unbruised skin and golden locks, looking insultingly good compared to how Steve's feeling after yet another night with too little sleep.

Steve suddenly feels very stupid. He doesn't know how, but obviously he imagined whatever happened last night. Sleep-deprivation, probably. Or maybe the crash gave him a concussion. Billy Hargrove is obviously just *fine*.

As if feeling that he's being watched, Hargrove stiffens and turns. Looks around, until his eyes land on Steve. And Steve draws in a sharp breath, because for a moment it feels as if Billy's looking *through* him, and there's a sharp look on his face that Steve has never seen before. But before he can react, it melts away and Hargrove gives him an amused once-over and raises an eyebrow before he nudges the girl lifeguard with an elbow and points at Steve. She turns, takes a look at him, and then they both laugh. Steve suddenly remembers what he's wearing, and feels himself blush.

Right. Whatever. Hargrove is okay. Just because Steve hallucinated him in the weirdest fucking scenario last night doesn't mean that he'll suddenly be less of an asshole.

Steve turns and walks out, and regrets paying the entrance fee for this. He spends ten minutes waiting outside the chain link fence, in the shade of some trees but still as far from the Camaro as he can get. When Robin shows up, in her mother's car that she is apparently allowed to use during the weekends, he murmurs a thanks and doesn't tell her why he wanted her to pick him up here.

Instead, he bunches up his jacket and throws it in the back, and lets himself enjoy the fact that Robin's mother's car has AC.

Billy knows when the night turns into morning, because the light changes. There are no windows here that he can see, but the ramp down to this level was open to the back of the steel works, so it makes sense that a certain amount of daylight will trickle in. He hasn't slept at all – too afraid after everything that happened and all too aware of how vulnerable he is in this position.

The belts are still tying him to the car, although they have loosened enough to allow for blood flow into his hands. He can feel his fingers tingle and sting. He doesn't want to look at them. Instead, he looks straight up into the concrete ceiling.

He doesn't know how long time has gone by, but he hears footsteps – flat soled Chuck Taylors against a concrete floor – and his heart skips a beat. Whipping his head to the side, he sees his copy come into view. It's even more disconcerting to see it in the light. It looks at him with cold eyes, and Billy wants to shrink away under its gaze. But he has learned already, that he can't.

The copy doesn't say anything, just reaches out a hand and grabs Billy's forearm. As soon as it does, the seatbelts – which haven't let up once, during the night – fall away as if they were just normal seat belts, leaving Billy's arms free. Before he can react, the copy tugs him off the car and pulls him upright.

Billy throws a punch. He's not even aware of it, but it's the first chance he gets and he's *taking* it. Unfortunately, his whole body aches and he's wobbly on his feet – the punch is the weakest one he's thrown for years, and the movement makes his shoulder burn.

The copy easily sidesteps the blow; it grabs Billy's fist in its hand and then punches him in the face with its other hand. Billy doesn't have a chance to avoid it, and goes down hard.

He finds himself on his elbows on the concrete floor, trying to make the world stop spinning, and gasps when the copy grabs his hair and pulls his face up to meet its eyes.

"Owed you one," it says, without inflection, before slamming him down on the floor. Billy only just manages to pull an arm up and avoid breaking his face. He's vaguely aware of the car starting, right next to where he's lying. When he twists his head, he looks up just in time to see the Camaro start backing up the ramp.

Still without a driver.

The sight sends a shiver down his spine. He's almost glad when it disappears from view, even though that leaves him alone with the copy, who's not letting up. There's an unyielding knee in his back, and when he reaches back with a shaking arm to try to fight back, the copy grabs him with ease.

"Don't be afraid," it murmurs in his ear, nonsensically and *too goddamn close*.

"The *fuck*," Billy hisses. Despite his sore body he tries to roll over, to get the thing off of him. It doesn't budge, and Billy fucking *hates* being pinned down. "Get off of me!" It's a relief, to feel the familiar burn of anger instead of the – sadly, also familiar – helpless fear. He uses it to his advantage, and when the knee disappears from his back he thinks for a second that the thing listened to him.

But then it presses his face down to the floor and wrenches his arm up behind his back. The move twists Billy's already sore shoulder the wrong way, and he opens his mouth to scream –

– but there's a sudden sharp pain in the back of his head, like an icepick to the skull.

He hears "Just stay very still," before the pain intensifies, and everything goes white.

When he grows aware of his surroundings again, he's being dragged. The copy's holding one of his arms and dragging him along, the back of his shoes scraping against the rough surface of the floor. Thankfully, his jeans and leather jacket protect him against being scraped-up too bad, but the pressure on his arm and shoulder makes him tear up. Gritting his teeth, he reaches up with his free hand, trying to pry the copy's hand off.

The copy turns around, just looking at him, and Billy *gasps*. Because as the copy turns, Billy suddenly sees a flash of himself through the copy's eyes. He sees his own bloody face stare up at it, sees his own eyes widen from the copy's point of view. A whimper escapes him before he can stop himself because *what the fuck*, but the image is gone as soon as it came, followed by an echo of the pain from earlier.

He's unceremoniously dropped to the floor. When he looks up he sees that they are in a room that looks like the one he was just in – no windows, and with a ramp on the other end of the room – only there is no daylight coming through, so this ramp is obviously closed off somehow. There is some light coming in through the opening they just went through, but it's not a lot. It's still dark.

There's a metal staircase in one corner, and that's where the copy has deposited Billy.

One other thing makes this room different from the last one; In the middle of the room is Billy's Camaro. *His* Camaro; the one he crashed, complete with her broken windshield and dents and scratches.

"What the fuck is *going on*?" Billy says. He doesn't know why. He's not really asking the copy, because he suspects that it won't give him answers anyway. He's proven right when all the copy does is reach in under the stairs and take out ... chains.

Billy's eyes widen as the copy takes a step towards him, pulling the chains – no, *one* chain only, folded twice – between its hands.

"No," he says, and struggles to his feet. Starts backing away. "You stay away from me!" He doesn't know what it's going to do with those chains but it can't be anything good.

The thing ignores him completely. It grabs him by the front of his jacket and throws him down on the stairs. He catches himself with his hands to avoid smashing his head open on the metal, and almost does it anyway when the copy grabs a hold of one of his arms and yanks it out from under him. Even though Billy tries, he can't pull his hand back, and has to watch as the copy – seemingly without effort – wraps the end of the chain around his wrist; once, twice. It pulls the chain so tight that it pinches Billy's skin, already rubbed raw from the seatbelts last night, and then the copy proceeds to force a padlock through two of the loops and click it in place. The pressure eases somewhat, but it's still tight. Too tight for Billy to get out of, at least.

Before he can react, the copy makes a grab for Billy's other arm. It leaves a piece of chain, maybe a foot, between Billy's hands, and makes sure to lope it around the metal railings of the staircase before wrapping it around Billy's other wrist, the rest of the chain hanging loosely from it. Billy struggles, but the copy doesn't seem bothered by it. In desperation, Billy tries kicking it, but it only gives him a blank look and pulls his fingers back in retaliation until he screams.

When Billy catches his breath again, he's chained to the railings of the stairs. Literally chained, with an old but sturdy chain, only slightly rusted. There's a shiny padlock on each wrist, locking him in place. It's the kind of locks that you can buy in any hardware store, and where one key probably fits every tenth lock produced ...

As if Billy's copy hears his thoughts, it leans in again. Picks up Billy's wrist, and puts the key back in the lock. For a second, Billy thinks that it's changed its mind – that it's going to unlock it. But then the copy, while making sure to keep steady eye contact, simply ... snaps the key. Leaving half of it in the lock, and letting the other half fall to the floor; just a useless piece of metal.

It takes a while, for the meaning of this to sink in; it wasn't just a show of strength – it was a show of *power*. It didn't just throw away the key – it destroyed the lock. It has no intention of letting Billy go, *ever*. When Billy *gets it*, the thing wearing his face has already done the same thing to the other lock. To add insult to injury, it places the broken off pieces of the keys in Billy's hand, and closes his fist around them. Like a gift.

Billy's eyes are burning. He breathes heavily through his nose and refuses to look up, because he doesn't want to see his own face look down on him with whatever expression must be on its face.

Suddenly, there's a sound, echoing through the building they're in. A shriek, mixed with something rumbling, like distant thunder. Billy and his copy both look up, but where Billy is startled, the copy looks calm. Attentive. Without a word, it turns and walks away, turning its back on Billy as if he is no longer important.

Billy, on the other hand, feels as if the air was just punched out of him. He's heard that sound before – last night, before he fled. He'd almost managed to convince himself that he was hallucinating the monstrous thing that attacked him – until now. Until he heard it again.

He eyes the opening in the door where the copy just walked out; judges its size. Would the monster be able to get through there? He remembers it being bigger, so maybe not. Hopefully not.

Perhaps he's safe from it, here.

He looks at his chained hands and thinks of how the other Billy snapped a metal key with a flick of its thumb.

Well. *Relatively* safe.

At least his hands are cuffed in front of him, rather than behind his back. He takes a good look at his wrists for the first time – they're bruised all to hell, with red marks where the belts have cut into the skin. He pulls on the chains, just to test them, but of course they don't give. He tries sliding his hands out, but all he succeeds in doing is hurting himself even more.

Eventually he moves up a couple of steps on the stairs and slumps up against a pole. He tells himself that he should probably try to get some rest, but his body hurts and his head hurts and when he closes his eyes he sees that monster again – but not like he remembers it from yesterday, but towering over him, silent and unmoving. It feels *too real* – and not like a memory. More like something that he's really seeing. But how can he, if he's trapped here?

The monster turns its head and – even without eyes – *looks* at him. Billy flinches, and his eyes snap open – when did he close them? – in the dark room where the copy left him.

He doesn't sleep.

3. Chapter 3

He doesn't sleep, but he's drifting. In and out of some kind of nightmare state. It started soon after he was left alone, with painful flashes of something *else*; something other than the concrete room where he's trapped. For one thing, he suddenly finds himself driving his Camaro, even though he *knows* that he's chained up in the steel works and his Camaro is right here, in a bad state just like him. As soon as he realizes that it *can't* be for real, he is thrown back into himself, opening his eyes and gasping like after a nightmare, but without having slept.

He keeps hearing voices, even though there are no people around. But he still hears them. It sounds like the pool. People laughing, talking, splashing in the water. When he closes his eyes he can see it. Smell it. He sees himself talking to Heather, and even sees Harrington from a distance, which is what cements it – it must be some kind of hallucination, because Harrington died yesterday.

Didn't he?

Reality shifts. He's at the pool, he's at the steel works. He's out in the sun, he's underground. He's driving his Camaro, he's chained to the railings. He's warm, he's cold.

He's in the showers with something writhing under his skin, he's hitting Heather over the head – and he can't breathe suddenly, can't breathe, can't ... can't *breathe*.

He hears screaming, or maybe he just imagines it. Maybe it's him.

And over all of it, like the blurry marks left from resting your hand on carbon copy paper, is ... a shadow. He can't see it, can't hear it – it's just there, tainting everything with its presence. Just out of sight, just out of reach, constantly around the corner and yet all-encompassing. Watching, waiting. Pulling the strings. He doesn't know what it is, but he knows that the shadow is what controls the copy, controls the monster. Billy can only sense it through whatever connection he has with his copy, but he can still feel its power. And it's terrifying.

He doesn't know how much time passes – time has no meaning, time doesn't exist – but the light that comes in from the other room has dimmed, so it must be evening. He hears steps approaching and lolls his head to the side, expecting to see his own smirking face. But it's not the copy. It's Heather, walking towards him.

They get along well, at work, but he ... he hit her. Didn't he? No, why would he do that, he likes her. He *couldn't* have, because she's here now. To help him, maybe? They get along well, after all.

"Heather," he rasps, and he doesn't recognize his own voice. He's thirsty. "You can't be here."

She doesn't reply, just keeps walking as Billy struggles into a sitting position on the stairs and blinks to make himself focus.

"There's this thing, here," he tries, again. "You have to go. Go get help."

But she's not listening. Isn't turning around, isn't leaving. Something's wrong.

"Go!" he tries again, rattling his chains. "You have to get help, call the ... I don't know, the police or something. Before it comes back. Please!" But she's coming closer still, and she's carrying something in her hands.

When she stops in front of him and he gets a good look at her, his heart sinks. Her face is like a mask, wearing a blank expression that he's never seen on her during their time working together. What she's holding is a plastic bowl, filled with water. There's a rag hanging off the side of it, half submerged in the water.

She holds it out to him. "Drink," she says. The words sound stilted coming out of her mouth, as if she hasn't gotten used to forming words. She adds, when he hesitates, "We do not want you dead."

Billy doesn't want to be dead either. And he *is* thirsty. So he lets her place the edge of the bowl at his lips, and tilt it up. Steadying it with one hand, he drinks. Closes his eyes so he doesn't have to look the rag, doesn't have to look at Heather's blank face.

She takes it away too soon. But then she kneels next to him and uses the rest of the water to clean his face. She wipes away the worst of the dried blood on his face, in his hair, on his hands – and she’s not being gentle, but not overly rough either. If anything, she’s *efficient* in her ministrations. He lets her do it, in a detached sort of way. He *could* fight, probably. Could shove her away and kick at her and scream. But what good would it do? He’d still be chained up.

He wishes, suddenly, that it would have been the thing wearing *his* face that was next to him. It would be so much easier to fight against himself, than someone that he was beginning to consider a friend.

He gets some sleep that night. He dreams of a dark and dead world with toxic air where there are no colors, or humans.

When he wakes up, he’s awkwardly draped over the metal steps and aching all over. He turns his head only to find the other version of him crouching there, too close; watching him sleep. He flinches, and watches its face pull into a smirk that looks so much like Billy’s that he has to swallow down bile.

“Wakey wakey,” it says, a teasing lilt to its voice.

“What do you want?” Billy says, barely louder than a whisper.

It doesn’t answer him. Instead it reaches for him, slowly, practically telegraphing its movements. Giving Billy plenty of time to knock its hand away with his elbow before it can touch him. The copy grins at that, and strikes – slaps him hard enough that his head snaps to the side. Then it says, “Two for flinching,” and slaps him again.

When Billy looks up, all he can see is the thing’s shit-eating grin. It’s running its tongue over its bottom lip as if waiting for a reaction. And if this was any other situation, Billy would get angry. But now, all he can feel is terror, because he *remembers* this. He remembers doing *exactly* this, to Danny F., in the locker room after practice, a couple of months ago.

And the worst thing is – he sees that the copy remembers it too. It’s *learning*. *Becoming* him. “No no no no no,” he chants, shaking his

head to get it *out of his brain*. “Stop it!”

The copy looks pleased. It stands up, and easily backs out of range as Billy aims a kick at it; watches with amusement as Billy rattles his chain. “*Stop!*”

Billy has never felt this helpless before, not even when Neil has him pushed up against a wall and he knows a beating is coming. The thought runs through his head unbidden, and he *sees* the moment when the copy catches it. Its smile widens. “Neil,” it says, and then straightens up, smile melting away into an expression of careful neutrality. “Dad.”

That’s the face Billy makes when he doesn’t know how Neil will react to something. He *knows* that face; has been practicing it in the mirror to get it right, with just the right amount of respect thrown in to look sincere.

The copy’s eyes widen just a fraction, and it steps back, just one step. Balls its hands up into fists at its side and swallows. “Yes sir,” it says, lower. And Billy has never seen that particular face on himself, but he *knows* it nonetheless. That’s the face for when he’s managed to anger Neil, and is preparing for the consequences.

“Stop it,” he whispers.

The copy is *pulling* these things from him, somehow. It knows how to act like him, and react like him, because they’re connected in some way. There is nothing about himself that Billy can hide from this creature. Nothing that he can protect, or keep hidden.

And just because he’s trying not to think about them, his secrets jump to the forefront of his mind; all the things he won’t admit to. The pain of his mother leaving, the feeling of Johnny’s lips on his own in eighth grade, looking at a fierce little red-headed girl and daring to feel hope that maybe, *maybe* he’d have someone on his side ..

He slams his head to the side, into the metal pole he’s leaning against, to distract himself and pull himself away from the memories. He hasn’t seen his mom in years, and he hasn’t thought of Johnny in months, but there’s one person who is actually close enough to be in

danger if the copy learns about her, and whom Billy wants to keep as far away from this version of him as possible.

But by the satisfied smile on the copy's face, it caught the thought. It gives Billy chills, and there's something in his chest that feels like panic as the copy gives a lazy salute and turns. Walks away.

"Don't!" he calls after it, but it doesn't turn around. "*Please* don't!"

The flashes – visions, hallucinations, whatever they are – continue all throughout the day. It's like he's being forced to watch a TV with only one channel, and that channel is whatever the copy's currently doing.

He gets a front row seat, later, to when the copy charms Heather's parents, sounding and acting just like Billy would have, in the same situation. Heather is there too; but not herself. Too stiff, too plastic. The copy isn't, though. It's smooth, and charismatic. Billy hears his own voice compliment the house, the food, the hosts. He can feel the ghost of a smile on his face, even though he's trying to pull away from it; get out of there.

The copy doesn't move, and Billy's forced to keep watching, as suddenly Max is there. He doesn't understand *why* she's there but it doesn't matter because the copy is *too close* to her and –

– and Billy pulls at the chain, bangs his wrist against the metal railing, *screams*. Tries to distract it, tries to stop whatever will happen –

– and the copy *is* distracted. Not by Billy's doing, though, but by the girl that Max is there with. Billy doesn't recognize her, didn't even know that Max had any friends who weren't boys, but he's grateful towards her for taking the copy's attention away from Max.

But then he feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The shadow awakens.

If he could, he'd yell at Max to *run*.

He comes back to himself on the stairs, panting, heart beating hard

and fast in his chest. He has no idea what is happening to Max or her friend right now – what the shadow did, or what it made the copy do – and it's driving him crazy. He spends what must be an hour trying in vain to free himself; rubbing his wrists until they're raw and bleeding, and banging the locks against the railing, again and again. It's a futile endeavor that only hurts him more, but he can't just sit around and do nothing.

It's not the copy that brings him water, that night, nor is it Heather. It's Heather's father, face as blank as his daughter's. He doesn't speak.

They don't feed him. It's just as well, because after what the monster did to him, he doesn't think he can swallow anything that isn't water without throwing up. But with no food and only a little water, he weakens. The next day, he's sluggish. He doesn't move much – there's no point in moving when he's still in chains – and he sits on the floor and leans against side of the stairs and only frowns when random images from whatever the copy's doing pops up in his brain.

It's not like he can stop them, anyway.

It's hot. It's the middle of summer in Hawkins, Indiana, where there is no breeze from the ocean to cool things down. It's not so bad underground and out of the sun, or it shouldn't be so bad, if Billy had been able to take off his leather jacket. As it is, with his hands chained the way they are, he's stuck in his layers. During the warmest hours when his hair is sweaty and clings to his neck, he unbuttons his shirt and shrugs it and the jacket off his shoulders, at least, for a while. But it's all he can do.

When he does, he sees some of the bruises; on his shoulders, upper arms, torso. There are some on his legs too, he sees when he pulls the leg of his jeans up. No doubt from getting tossed around on the hood of the fake Camaro, and then getting tossed around by the monster that's wearing his face. He imagines his back must look worse, but can't crane his neck far enough to look at it. Doesn't want to, anyway.

He tries to think of nothing, but it's difficult when there's nothing there for him to focus on other than his situation, and his crashed

car. By now he has catalogued all the things that he must fix on the Camaro, at least the ones he can see from here, and he steadfastly ignores the voice in his head that is telling him he's never going to get the chance to.

"We'll get out of this, you'll see," he says, to the Camaro. Talking out loud to comfort himself more than her, perhaps, but no one's around to judge him for talking to his car – and it's not like he's got anyone else to talk to, so he doesn't care. "You and me, baby. I'll fix you right up when we get out of here."

He pauses at the realization that they're *both* trapped here; banged up and hidden away, and with a fake version out there pretending to be them. It makes something ache in his chest as he looks at his girl. They're in the same boat. He clears his throat.

"Imagine us, cruising down the highway. Windows down, music up. All the way back home. Sounds good, huh?"

She doesn't answer, of course, but he imagines that she agrees.

When evening comes, and the temperature has dropped enough for him to have to button his shirt up, he sleeps. He doesn't know what time it is – he doesn't remember the last time he had his watch, but he probably lost it sometime between choking on a monster tentacle and being tied to a possessed replica of his car – but he wakes up and suddenly he's not in the steel works anymore but in ... a sauna? It's hot, too hot; *painfully* hot, and that thought is the only thing that registers before he looks up and sees Max peer in through the window. His heart skips a beat.

A sound comes out of his throat, too much like a sob.

And just like that, he's shoved back, reduced to only witnessing. He's not in the sauna – the *copy* is in the sauna. He's not in pain – the *copy* is. It's strange, though, how much of it Billy feels.

It's as if the door to his mind has been slightly ajar since the copy did whatever it did to him; allowing it access whenever it wants. And now that door has been thrown wide open, denting the wall, and Billy's in no state to close it. He can only watch, and feel, as the copy

feeds on his own horror and *uses* it – uses it to break down and cry, and beg, and act *just* like Billy would have acted if he'd been allowed to. For a second, Billy thinks that maybe it *is* him, after all, because Max is there and he's in pain and he *does* want to cry. But it's not him, in the driver's seat. It's the copy. And behind it, somewhere behind and over all of them; the shadow.

It wants to *hurt* them. Billy can feel it, watered down through his connection with the copy. The shadow wants to get at the kids, wants to hurt them. Kill them.

And Max is there with them.

Billy can't stop it, can't sever the connection. But maybe he can distract it, at least enough to crack the façade. Somehow, in the back of his mind, he decides to move. To slam his head into the nearest surface.

Amazingly, it works. Distracts the thing enough that it loses its grip, allows the door to Billy's brain to slide back from wide open to ajar. And Billy opens his eyes, back in the steel works, with a bleeding cut in his hairline from where he slammed his head into the metal. He's sobbing, and must have been crying for a while judging by the way his cheeks are already wet and his throat feels raw. Blood drips down from the split in his skin, and mixes with the tears on his face.

He cries until he runs out of tears.

Sometime later, the sound of unhurried steps approaching rouses him. When he opens his eyes, he looks up into his own face; blank and unemotional. It sends a jolt of fear down his spine, even though when the thing doesn't move. Just keeps standing there, watching.

For the first time that Billy sees it, it looks a mess. Sweaty, dirty, and with its hair in disarray. It's shirtless, and there are marks on its skin – but not only marks; *veins*. Dark veins, covering all of its skin that Billy can see. It's barefoot, and even the feet are veiny.

If it was nightmarish before, it's nothing compared to what it looks like now.

When it reaches out for him, he flinches away from it, but the chains don't allow him to move far enough away to escape it. It grabs Billy by the hair and presses a thumb into the new cut on his head, making him hiss with the pain of it.

"Don't do that again," it says, before releasing him harshly and turning to leave.

No one brings Billy any water that night.

He doesn't sleep well. Short instances only, which are interrupted by flashes of scenes or people that have him gasping awake, heart pounding in his chest and with their screams echoing in his ears. He has no way of telling if any of it is real, or just nightmares; not when his whole existence has been reduced to a multi-layered nightmare with no end in sight.

It's daytime, he's pretty sure – because it's lighter again, and he can vaguely hear birds chirping from outside – when someone visits him next. When he lolls his head to the side to see who it is, fear shoots through him, like shards of ice.

It's not the copy. It's not Heather or even Heather's dad.

It's *his* dad. Neil.

"Hello, son," he says, and for a moment Billy thinks that his dad has come to save him. He sits up and everything, opens his mouth to speak, expects his dad to ... rush forward, or ask what's happened, or help him get out of the chains, or *something*. But whatever he was about to say gets stuck in his throat as he sees the state Neil is in. His face is covered in grime, especially around his mouth. His hair is tousled, his shirt is rumpled and not tucked in his pants, and there are ripped off pieces of duct tape still around the cuffs of his shirt.

Billy's heart sinks.

"D-dad?" he says, knowing that that's not his dad. Not anymore.

The worst thing is that it would have fooled Billy, if whatever monster that got to his dad had just cleaned him up a bit. Because the

slow way he's walking, and the cold look on his face – that's all *normal*. Billy wouldn't even have reacted to that. But this, this ... copy. It's not Billy's dad. Billy's dad would never let himself be seen looking less than immaculate. Neil likes when things are ... neat.

It can't be Billy's dad.

But, as Billy watches, the man in front of him shudders and slumps over, as if his strings are being cut. He stumbles and looks around – disoriented – and Billy has never seen that look on his father's face. Confusion; *fear*. His gaze land on Billy and his eyes widen. He takes a step forward before jerking to a stop as if walking into an invisible wall.

“Wh– what? Billy, what's going on?”

Billy wishes he could answer, but before he gets a chance, he's assaulted by images. Memories, but not his own. Billy's hands (but not really Billy) choking Neil until he's slumped over. Billy's hands (but not really Billy) duct-taping Neil's wrists together and dragging him out to the waiting Camaro, too early for the neighbors to be awake. Billy's hands (but not really Billy) holding his father still while the monster – the one Billy ran from that first night – approaches. His father's screams, silenced abruptly. Writhing in his grip, and then going still.

And then, Billy's hands (but not really Billy) letting go. Him (but *not* him) stepping back, and watching as the monster disappears back into the shadows. Looking dispassionate at Neil, who's getting back to his feet, wobbling; face blank.

Billy sees himself (no, *not* himself – the copy) handing Neil a water bottle, and point to the stairs behind them. He watches Neil take the bottle, and turn. Leave without a word, as if nothing happened.

He blinks, and he's back. Before him is his dad, who's still looking at him as if he's got answers. His face is anything but blank – he looks too terrified to be angry. And *that's* what drives the point home. It is his dad. Not a copy.

Tears well up in Billy's eyes, and spill over. “Dad!” He grabs his

chains, heaves himself upright, stands up on shaky legs, takes a step closer – as far as he can go. Neil doesn't move, still stuck in place. In his hand there's a water bottle, the same one Billy saw, and he's gripping it as if he's trying to hold on to something.

"Billy, what's ..." He trails off. His eyes glass over again.

"No!" Billy cries. "Dad, I'm sorry! Dad, *please!*"

But Neil doesn't react. Straightening up, his face goes back to blank, and when he moves, there's no hesitation in his steps. Billy can't help but back up when he approaches, because it's his dad but at the same time it's not. Billy has backed away from Neil plenty of times before, but he's never been as terrified as he is right now. Sobbing like a child.

The chain slides up along the railing as Billy backs up on the outside of the stairs, until he gets to the second metal pole that stops him from getting any further. By then, his hands are over his head and he can't back up anymore.

He can't get away when Neil unscrews the cap on the water bottle, and he can't get away when Neil's hand shoots out and grabs his face.

Usually, when they're in this position, Neil's face will morph into a sneer and he will tell Billy to 'stop crying like a bitch' and 'act like a man about it'. Billy would give *everything he has* to see that sneer right now, instead of that cold look on his father's face as he tightens his hold on Billy's face.

"Drink," he says, voice flat as he brings the bottle to Billy's lips. "We do not want you dead."

That night, or maybe morning? He hasn't kept track of the time, not since his dad left him whimpering on his knees, water sloshed all over the front of his shirt. But later, Billy hears rumblings from another part of the steel works. A shriek, something like voices, the sound of something heavy being moved – dragged or pushed – across uneven surfaces. Shortly thereafter, a kid walks into the room where Billy is being held, holding a couple of water bottles. It's a boy,

maybe Max's age, and Billy wracks his brain to try to remember if this is one of her nerdy little friends. It's not a face Billy remembers, though, so maybe not. Billy doesn't know whether to be relieved or not – it's still a *kid*, who's obviously gotten snatched up by the monster. And no kid deserves that.

The boy doesn't speak to him, or acknowledge him in any way; he just puts the bottles down on the floor at the bottom of the stairs, and leaves. If Billy had been more aware, he might have tried to stop him. Grabbed his arm, maybe, tried to keep him here.

But Billy is *tired*. He hasn't eaten anything for days, and the water he's gotten hasn't been enough. He's still hurting, still aching, still fucking terrified. And more than that, he's *hopeless*. Seeing his dad taken over by that thing makes it all the more real; Billy is alone. There is no one who will look for him, now. His chains are tight, his shoulders ache – he's never getting out of here.

As soon as the boy leaves, Billy lurches upright. Scoots down a couple of steps from where he'd been resting, and reaches for the bottles.

There are four in total. He unscrews one and downs it, and has gotten halfway through the second one before he slows down. Licking his lips, not wasting a drop, he forces himself to stop. They haven't given him water like this before, and he doesn't know when he'll get more. It's probably wise to save some, just in case.

The water wakes him up a little; makes him more aware. He's just put the bottle down when reality shifts in an all too familiar way, and he's looking out through the copy's eyes again. It's like it forcibly pulled him through that open door between their minds, and Billy gets the feeling that it wants him to watch this.

And what he sees is ... He doesn't know what he's looking at. There's a line of people, just standing around. His dad is one of them. Heather too. Heather's parents. As he watches, he sees the boy who just brought him the water join the rest of them, further back in the queue.

In front of all of them is the monster, only halfway out into the light. There's a darkness tinting the whole scene, and an alien feeling of ...

excitement? ... trickling through the copy's connection to Billy, and Billy knows; the shadow is up to something.

When the people start moving forward, walking towards the monster, he wants to scream at them. Yell at them to run. But he can't move, can't make a sound. Can only witness.

And when it happens, he doesn't understand what he's seeing, at first. Can't wrap his mind around it. But he sees Heather walk towards the monster. She's twitching, like she's having a seizure, and then she's falling.

She goes *splat*.

And Billy ... doesn't get it. But then the next one, a woman, falls too, and seems to break against the surface of the floor. By the time the third person falls, the monster has moved closer and the ... the *remains* of the fallen people are somehow moving towards it. Moving *up* its giant arms. Adding to its bulk, making it bigger.

Becoming part of it.

Billy wants to throw up. Wants to scream, wants to cry, wants to look away. He's not allowed to do any of those things, though, not for as long as the copy – and the shadow – holds him there. Makes him watch as the people, one by one, melt in front of the monster. Become one with it.

He recognizes a couple more of them; the guy who works in the hardware store, and the woman who's always out jogging early in the morning. They all go *splat*.

His dad is at the end of the queue, but he's getting closer. Billy can feel himself panicking and is distantly aware of himself screaming, pulling on his chains, fighting in vain against unyielding metal somewhere else, close to here but not close enough to *do* something.

Useless, he's *useless*! He can't stop this, can't save his dad, can't save anyone. He doesn't want to see this. Please, God, he doesn't want to see this.

He sees his father walk up to the monster. Sees how he starts

twitching. Sees him fall –

– and Billy *wrenches* until he's back in his own body because he *can't bear to see it*. He's on his knees on the concrete, wrists bleeding anew, and before he knows it he's hunching over, throwing up the water he just drank, all over himself and on the floor. He hasn't eaten for days so his stomach is empty, but he continues heaving until there's nothing but acids coming up, and then he just rolls to the side, trying to catch his breath – but he can't *breathe*!

There's a rumble echoing through the building, and then a crash, making Billy flinch. It's the monster – bigger now, stronger, smashing out of the confinement of the steel works.

Billy wishes he could do the same, but all he can do is curl up on the floor and gasp for breath.

He doesn't know how long it takes him to regain his senses, but when he does he's cold all over even though he's covered in sweat. He feels strangely numb, like he's all out of feelings. Like maybe that thing took over him too, and made him as blank as the others.

The door in his mind is open, left like that when he escaped back here. He knows the monster is on the move. The Billy-copy is driving the Camaro-copy somewhere. The shadow is lurking on the sidelines, poised and ready to strike. And Billy doesn't ... care. He hasn't got the energy to.

His dad is dead. For as shitty as he was, and for as much as he may have hated Billy, Neil was Billy's *dad*. His only family. And now he's dead. And here Billy is, weakening by the hour. Trapped, with no one knowing where he is, with no one coming for him. He'll die here, too.

So it doesn't fucking matter, that the monster is on the move. Billy can't do anything to stop it, anyway.

The mental door is open, though. More than just a little, and Billy's not ... he's not being pulled through it this time. It's like the copy has forgotten to close it. Tentatively, Billy approaches it, in his mind. Feels for that connection, and follows it. Because what does it matter anyway, right?

He closes his eyes, lets his mind jump in.

And finds himself in the driver's seat, quite literally. In the Camaro. It's dark outside, the engine is rumbling and there, some far distance away, is a car that won't start. There are people there, running around. Billy thinks that he may recognize some of them, but he hasn't got time to think about it before he notices that he's not alone. The shadow is there, or the copy. Maybe they're the same thing, really – but it's right there with him in this body and he realizes with a start that it didn't expect him to be here now.

It's about to run those people over. He knows it. So he ... refuses. Experimentally, he keeps his hand (the copy's hand) on the wheel, refuses to shift gears. There is a growl somewhere in his head, and his foot (the copy's foot) presses down on the gas. But he holds on, and is momentarily struck dumb when it actually works. When he's in *control*, just for a bit.

Fuck the copy. See how it likes it to not be in control of its body.

Billy revs the car again, watching as the people in the distance look up. Warning them, revving the car's engine again to let them know what's about to happen. Telling them to get out of the way. That, at least, he can do.

The control doesn't last. He's yanked away by force, and hears the motor of the Camaro roar like a chained beast who's just been let loose before he finds himself back in the steel works again, disoriented and gasping. Thrown out, by force. But the connection is still there; the door isn't closed, so he goes for it again. Because *fuck* that monster, fuck *everything*, if Billy's gonna die he's gonna at least annoy the shit out of this thing before he goes.

It's trying to stop him, this time. Trying to keep him out. But Billy knows how to do it now, knows how to follow the connection to the other side. He closes his eyes and *pushes*. Finds himself looking out of the copy's eyes despite the copy not wanting him there.

Unfortunately, all he can do this time is watch. And he tunes in at the same time as he spots Max there –

Not Max. Please, not Max.

– and he has to watch as he (*no*, the copy) stalks towards her. She's pleading with him, panicking, babbling – does she still think it's him? Billy's heart aches at the thought – and then Billy feels the body he's in raise its arm and backhand Max viciously. He watches in horror as she crumples to the floor. All his focus is on her, and he's barely aware of the copy's body moving on; throwing some other kids around, too, before picking one of them up. A girl. Max's age. The girl from Heather's house.

What happened to Max?

Billy's frozen, and maybe that's why the copy isn't fighting as hard trying to keep him out. Or maybe it's just busy – Billy can sense the shadow, closer now, and when they exit the corridor and walk into the ... mall? ... the monster is there, towering over the rubble, larger than life and demanding attention.

It takes Billy a moment to notice that his copy isn't actively fighting him anymore. That it seems to have forgotten about their connection entirely. He senses that the shadow's – and, by extension, the monster's and the copy's – focus is solely on the girl in their arms. Billy is no longer important. Dismissed, cast aside and forgotten.

Good.

When the girl wakes up and thrashes in their hold, Billy gathers what's left of his strength and prepares to make his move. He's blindsided – and so is the copy and the shadow – when they're holding her down on the floor, with them leaning over her, and she reaches up a hand. Touches them, and *sees* him – sees *Billy*, not the copy.

There are flashes of memories filling his head, which Billy should be used to by now, but these ones are *good*. Light. They're of his mother and him, on the beach. The sun above, the water below, the sand between his toes. Seagulls, waves, a gentle breeze. His mother's smile. His own innocent joy.

And he's overcome with gratitude to this girl, whoever she is, for

somehow giving him a good memory, at the end. Because he *knows* he's going to die. Now, or in the near future – it doesn't matter. But at least like this, he has something *good* to hold on to.

It gives him the boost he needs to push the copy aside, and take over. Get in the driver's seat of this body, like the shadow did to all those other people. Like it did to Billy's dad.

The copy is clawing at his mind, trying to fight back now, but Billy's suddenly finding it easy to ignore, getting off the girl and turning to the monster. Its grotesque body is overlapped by a sense of darkness, somehow – like the monster and the shadow is becoming one. It's angry – at Billy, but mostly at the girl at his feet. It roars, and prepares to strike.

Billy steps in front of it. And when it attacks, he holds it back, somehow.

Back at the steel works, he is weak. Can barely stand. *This* body, the copy's body, is strong, and now Billy's using that strength against the creature before him. Through the connection, Billy can feel what it's going to do. He senses the attack before it comes, but he still doesn't move.

His body is banged up all to hell. It's only fair that the copy's body gets destroyed, too.

Still, being in control means that he feels all of it when meat and bone slam into him. The pain is ... like nothing he has ever felt. And it comes again, and again, and again.

The connection is wavering, the door between them is closing, and Billy's still here, on the wrong side of it. He wonders, distantly, if it's better to die here, in a body that isn't his, than it is to waste away at the steel works.

The monster roars, and there's his answer. Billy was never one to simply waste away.

He roars back.

The world explodes in pain. He can't feel the connection to the copy

anymore, he can't feel the monster, he can't feel the shadow. He's falling, falling, falling, and he never hits the ground until he's suddenly already on his back, looking up at a broken ceiling. There are people there. Voices. He can't hear what they're saying.

Max is there. Alive.

He chokes on whatever counts as blood in this body. He didn't get to say goodbye to his dad. With the life draining out of him, he knows he hasn't got enough time to say goodbye to Max either. Not properly.

So, as the darkness closes in and he drowns in agony, he tries to form words, before the body fails him.

"I'm sorry," he says.

And dies.

Only he doesn't. Not really.

He gasps awake, in the darkness back at the steel works. Grasps at his torso, expecting to find blood and ripped skin and bones, still feeling the ghost of the pain he was just in.

But he's not ripped open. His body is weak and aching, but whole. He's not on the floor of the ruined mall, surrounded by people; he's on the floor in the basement of an abandoned steel mill, with absolutely no one around.

"*Fuck*," he says, shakily.

Because of course he shouldn't have dared hope for a quick death.

4. Chapter 4

It has been a couple of *really weird* days. Steve is sitting in his kitchen, on the morning after everything went down, holding an unopened can of Coke fresh from the fridge to his head. It's not that he's warm – it's just that he's got the mother of all headaches, and kinda wishes for death.

Or no. No he doesn't. Enough people have died.

It's a Friday, the day after the 4th of July that Hawkins will never forget, and he supposes that the town is grieving its dead. An accident, they call it. Fire at the new mall. Terrible tragedy, so many dead.

Steve could very well have been one of them. So could Robin. So could the kids. They could all have ended up as names on a piece of paper, like the one he saw on the poster board at the hospital. An ever-growing list of names – people who'd gone missing. And people who were confirmed dead.

He tastes bile, and rushes up to throw up in the sink. He hasn't really eaten in a while, so there's not much to throw up, but he does it anyway. Has been doing it since last night, when whatever drug the Russians injected him with started wearing off.

When he's done, he slides down on the floor and cracks open his Coke. Downs it, to get the taste of vomit out of his mouth.

After a rather spectacular burp, he decides that getting up is too much work, and makes himself as comfortable as he can with his back to the kitchen cabinets.

All those lives, lost. All those people, gone.

He wonders if he knew any of them. He probably did; it's a small town. But he took one look at the list that a nurse had pinned to the board – with people already starting to flock around it to add their missing loved ones' names on there – and decided to leave. They'd given him a cursory check earlier and found that it was probably for

the best if he stayed overnight so they could keep him under observation, with him being drugged and having taken some hits to the head and all, but no one stopped him when he left. They had other things on their minds; other patients to attend to.

So Steve had walked all the way back home, used the spare key hidden under a flower pot to let himself in, and then proceeded to *not sleep* for the rest of the night while he was sweating the drugs out of his system and letting everything that had happened sink in.

He spends all Friday in the house. He doesn't go outside, he doesn't listen to the radio or turn the news on. He takes a shower, pops the maximum dosage of pain pills, puts in a tape in the VCR and watches three movies back to back, trying to not think.

In the afternoon, the phone rings.

He walks out into the kitchen, to where the phone is mounted on the wall, and simply *watches it* until it stops ringing. He wonders if it was perhaps his parents. No one called them from the hospital, because Steve's eighteen and a legal adult, but news must have travelled across the country by now, right? With so many dead. Perhaps his parents heard about what happened, and wants to make sure their only son is all right.

The phone rings again. He takes a deep breath and picks up.

"Steve," someone says before he even opens his mouth. It's Dustin. "Are you okay? We went to see you at the hospital just now and they told us you'd discharged yourself and – are you *okay*?"

Steve has been trapped in an underground Russian base, been drugged and tortured, and fought a two-story monster made out of melted people. If there's a word for what he is, it's the opposite of 'okay'. But it's *Dustin*, so he says "Yeah," and realizes by the rasp of his voice that it's the first words he's spoken out loud since last night.

"Uh-huh, *sure*," Dustin says, and Steve can hear his eyes roll over the phone. God, he loves that kid. "We're coming over."

"What?" he says, startled out of his fond feelings.

“We just wanna make sure you’re okay, Steve. That’s what friends do. We’re coming over.” And then he hangs up. Steve is left standing there, with the phone in his hand, staring at it dumbly.

Ten minutes after the phone call, the phone rings again. It’s not his parents this time, either. It’s a woman, sounding like she’s trying hard to keep it together.

“Steve ... Harrington?”

“Yeah?” Steve says. “Who’s this?”

“I’m sorry, I’m ... My name is Susan Mayf– Hargrove.” Steve goes cold all over when he’s suddenly reminded of things he’s tried hard not to think about up until now. Billy, impaled by the monster and falling, dying right there in front of them. Billy, trying to hold the thing back with his bare hands. Billy, slumped over in his burning car after Steve crashed the Toddfather into him. And earlier, something he only just *now* realizes must be connected to it all somehow; Billy, terrified, on the hood of that car. What he’d thought was a hallucination, but probably wasn’t.

Billy, who is dead now.

Too late, he realizes that the woman is speaking. He shakes his head to snap himself out of it. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Could you repeat that, ma’am?” Because even after all of this, he’s got manners.

“Oh,” the woman – Susan – says, like an exhale of air. “Yes, of course. I ... I’m at the hospital. My husband is ... he was one of the ones who ...” Steve hears her take a breath, trying to steady herself, “... who died. His son, my ... Billy. Too.” Steve nods, even though she can’t see him. Wonders where she’s going with this. “There’s a lot of ... My daughter, Max. I think you know her?”

“Yes.” That, at least, he can answer. He knows Max.

“She’s okay,” Susan says, as if she’s trying to convince herself. “She’s okay, but there’s a lot of things to do, and I ... Her friends were here. They said they were going to visit you. I was wondering ... if, possibly, Max could join them?” She continues, as if she’s afraid Steve

will tell her no. “Just for a couple of hours. I think it might be good for her to ... to spend some time with her friends. And I need ... I need to get some things in order. I’ll pay you.”

“No, no,” Steve says, and when she draws in a sharp breath at his words, he realizes how it sounded to her. “I mean, no, of course she can come. You don’t have to pay me. Please. Bring her over, it’s okay.”

There’s silence on the other end, as if the woman can’t speak for a moment. Then, “Thank you,” followed by “We’ll be there soon,” before she hangs up.

Steve looks at the phone in his hand, then around the kitchen. If people are coming over, he should probably clean up a bit.

He doesn’t.

Claudia Henderson is the first one to arrive, with Dustin and Lucas. She gives Steve a big hug as soon as he opens the door, tuts at his face and thankfully ignores the way he has to swallow several times before he’s able to plaster a smile onto his face.

“Oh you poor dear,” she says. “Dustin told me what happened.” Steve is pretty sure that Dustin *didn’t*, actually, and makes a mental note to ask about the official story later. He nods, and Claudia gesticulates at the two boys who are already kicking their shoes off in his hallway. “Lilian brought Lucas over to spend some time at our house, but with everything going on – it’s so horrible, everything that’s happened, who could have thought – and the Church called, they need volunteers, and well I *am* on the committee ...”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Henderson,” Steve says, because it is. “I really don’t mind.”

The next couple of minutes are a flurry of Mrs. Henderson telling Dustin to be nice, and that she’ll be back soon, and that he can call her at any time and she’ll come pick him up, and she hugs him probably twenty times – and the other boys and Steve, too – before she leaves Steve with a foil-wrapped casserole and tells them she’ll be back in a couple of hours.

Just as she's leaving, another car pulls up at the driveway. Steve doesn't recognize it, but when Max jumps out of it he surmises that it's Susan Hargrove's car. A woman steps out, and now that Steve sees her he realizes that he's seen her around. Picking Max up, a couple of times. He's always thought that she looked ... frail. But if she was frail before, it's nothing compared to now; she looks like a strong wind can blow her over – pale, with red-rimmed eyes.

Max comes up to him with a backpack hanging over one shoulder, face gaunt and jaw clenched hard.

"Hey," Steve says. He doesn't ask if she's okay. She watched her brother – or, well, step-brother – die last night, and apparently her step-dad was one of the victims, too. No one is okay after something like that.

She looks over her shoulder, to where Mrs. Henderson is wrapping her arms around Susan Hargrove.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Max asks, under her breath.

Steve is taken off-guard. "What?"

"I don't wanna be in that house tonight. Mom says there's so much to be done but she's just crying, and I don't ... I don't wanna be there." Her voice cracks. "*Please*, Steve."

"Yeah," Steve says before even thinking it through. "Of course."

"Thanks," she mumbles, and when Susan walks up to the door she turns to her and says, "Some of us are staying the night here, mom. Can I do that too?"

Susan Hargrove blinks and turns to Steve. Max elbows him in the side and he clears his throat, says, "Uh, yeah. I mean, after something like this. Might be good to have people around who ..." He shrugs, helplessly, "... who were there? You know?"

Susan Hargrove must be in some kind of shock, still – or maybe the woman is simply desperate for some time to herself to have a proper breakdown – because she agrees. Makes sure to thank Steve profusely before giving Max a bone-crushing hug and stroking her cheek in a

way that irrationally makes Steve wish for his own mother.

Then he's left alone with the kids. Steve sets them all up in the living room, puts a movie on – no one even argues with his choice – and puts Mrs. Henderson's casserole in the oven to heat it up.

By unspoken agreement, they don't actually talk about what happened. Instead they talk about unimportant things, like superheroes and comics and their favorite foods. They eat, and they watch the movie, and they laugh at the funny bits – and if their laughter sound a little forced, none of them mention it. Just like none of them mention the Gate, or the monster, or the Russians.

And like none of them mention Hopper. El. *Billy*.

Steve remembers, once again, Billy on the hood of his car, last weekend. He wonders if it's something that he should tell them about, wonders if it's important. But then he takes a good look at them – a bunch of kids who have been through too much already, and who already have too much to deal with – and decides that it can wait. Whatever that was, it won't change anything.

Eventually, Mrs. Henderson returns to pick up the boys. When Lucas asks Max if she wants a ride too, she gives Steve a significant look and lies; says that her mom will pick her up later.

With the promise to check in again tomorrow, they leave. And Steve is alone with Max.

It's a bit awkward. He hasn't really been alone with her before – he hasn't been alone with *any* traumatized child before, and is ill-equipped to handle it. He doesn't know what to say or do. Luckily, she doesn't seem to expect anything from him. Just turns to him and says, "So ... Where can I sleep?"

He shows her to the guest room, and points out the bathroom. Plays the good host and tells her where the phone is, and to help herself to anything in the fridge if she's hungry. She stops in the doorway, hefts the backpack up higher on her shoulder. Chews on her bottom lip for a while, before she says, "I need a favor."

“Oh,” Steve says, wondering if this is something he’ll be able to do.
“Of course. What is it?”

“I need you to drive me to the steel works.”

Steve’s mind goes blank. “What?” Because wasn’t that where the monster was hiding, before it came after them? He’s *sure* someone mentioned that.

“El, she said ...” Max bites her lip and won’t look up. “She said that that’s where it took Billy. Where he got ... *flayed*.” She raises her chin, meets his eyes. There’s something steely in the way she looks, and Steve knows that she’s going to make her way there, with or without him. “I need to go there. To see it.”

Steve ... absolutely does *not* want to go there. As a matter of a fact, right after the Upside Down and the mall, it’s at a solid third place on his list of places where he does not want to go. He doesn’t say that, though. Instead, he remembers something that he hopes can get him out of it:

“Max, I ... I *would*, but. My car’s broken down. I can’t drive it.”

“That’s okay,” Max says. “We can take Neil’s truck.” Her eyes darken. “It’s not like he’ll need it anymore.”

Steve swallows.

“Oh. Um ... Okay.”

Fuck.

The next morning when Steve comes downstairs, she’s already got her shoes on and is ready to go. Steve tries to stall; asks her if she doesn’t want breakfast and tells her that he has some pancake mix somewhere, but she’s so determined to leave that he only sighs and grabs a couple of candy bars.

Fuck being a responsible adult. Chocolate for breakfast it is.

They walk, all the way across town to Cherry Lane. It’s early enough

that it's not so hot outside yet, but it's an uncomfortable walk nonetheless. Very few people are out. Those who are, only nod when they make eye-contact. There are no waves, no greetings. Just grave nods. Everyone knows about the tragedy. Everyone knows someone who's been affected by it.

It will take a long time for Hawkins to recover from this.

When they get to Cherry Lane, Susan's car is missing. So is Billy's – of course, because Steve crashed into it two nights ago and yeah, no, he doesn't want to think about that right now.

In the carport, though, is a truck. Max sets her jaw and walks up to the house – after declining Steve's offer to accompany her – and emerges not two minutes later with a key.

"He has a spare one," she says, and throws it to Steve. Then she frowns. "Had," she amends. Steve doesn't comment on the slip.

"What about your mom?" he asks, instead.

"She left a note," is Max's reply. "She's at the funeral home. I wrote her a note back. That we needed the car, I mean."

And that's that.

Before getting in the truck, Steve looks around the carport. There's a crowbar leaning against the wall under a shelf, and he picks it up and hefts it in one hand. It's heavier than his bat, but it'll work. No way is he going to the place where the monster came from without a weapon – and he couldn't very well walk through town with the bat without raising some questions.

Max watches him as he gets in and puts the crowbar down next to his leg so he'll be able to drive. Then she reaches into her backpack and pulls out a big kitchen knife without a word. Apparently they both had the same thought. Steve nods and starts the car while she silently puts the knife back.

When they get to the steel works Steve parks in the front and turns the engine off. He takes a breath and turns to Max. "Okay, we're here. But Max ..." He looks her in the eye. "What are you hoping to

find here?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and suddenly she sounds her age. Just a kid, who’s been through hell. “I just need to see it.”

They’re already here. And the Gate is closed. The monster is dead – Steve *saw* it die. Taking a quick look around shouldn’t pose any danger. So he nods, and they exit the car.

He hasn’t been here before – has never had any reason to. By the looks of things, people have been here recently, though. There are tracks in the dust on the floor at the entrance, and all of them lead to a staircase. A basement.

The sun is shining in through the broken windows, and he can see flecks of dust play in the rays. Birds are singing outside. The monster is dead.

And yet, Steve is hesitant to go down there.

He grips his crowbar tighter. “Are you sure about this?”

Max doesn’t answer, but she nods and walks past him. And he’s not going to let her go down there on her own. Even though the monster is dead, her brother got flayed down there. He’s not going to make her face that on her own. If it’s closure she’s after, he’ll make sure she gets it. It’s the least he can do, after he failed to save Billy from ... whatever that was, with the car, a week ago.

They end up in a large underground room. No doors, no windows, no way in or out other than the stairs they came from. Steve only knows this because he lets his eyes roam over the walls and ignores the rest of the room, which is filled with debris. There’s a large hole torn open in the ceiling, with pieces of rebar sticking out the cracked and broken concrete. A bit of blue sky can be seen through it, and Steve relaxes a fraction.

They can’t see any tracks on the floor down here. New dust probably covered them from when the monster broke out. Steve is secretly glad – he doesn’t want to see any evidence of what might have taken place here. Max may want closure, but none of them really need

details. They have enough nightmare fodder already.

He sits down on the stairs and opens a Mars bar that he stuffed in his back pocket before he left the car. It's a little melted, but it'll do. He sits there, eats his chocolate and watches Max as she walks around the room, climbing over slabs of concrete and looking at marks on the walls. He can keep track of her from here, but he wants to give her space.

It's weird, to think that Billy was here. Was he taken over by the Mindlayer before or after Steve saw him on the Camaro? Could Steve have stopped this whole thing, if he'd only been faster, or smarter about it?

It hurts to think about, so he tries not to. Luckily, Max has finished her round of the room, so Steve wipes his hands on his pants and stands up. Grabs his crowbar, but in a looser grip this time.

"You ready to go?"

She nods, but looks closer to crying than before. "Yeah."

"You get what you came here for?"

"I don't know what I was expecting," she says in a voice that tries to be angry, and wipes at her eyes. "He's gone anyway."

Steve has nothing to say to that, so he says nothing. But he puts a hand on her shoulder as they walk back up into the main part of the steel works. Trying to show comfort or something. It's never been his strong suit.

He stops momentarily when they are back in the big room. Looks at the tracks in the dust. All of them are leading down there, into the basement. He can't see how many there are, and he thinks again of the list in the hospital. Wonders how many people lost their lives here. It's horrible to look at, and for a second he feels as if they've done something sacrilegious, like walked into a tomb or something. He thinks about how his and Max's tracks will be the only ones leading *out* of there. How no one else got out alive from that room.

He feels faint, all of a sudden. Like he's going to throw up. Turning

away from Max to hide it, he blinks until the urge to vomit passes ...

And that's when he sees it. Tracks moving to the side. Two of them – one leading to the entrance to the basement, and one leading away from it. Both of them done by the same person, judging by the size of them.

They are ... small. Made by someone with smaller feet than Steve's, that's for sure. He glances over at Max and looks at her shoes. They look about the same size at the tracks he can see here.

A *kid* made those tracks. And just like that, the urge to throw up is back.

At least until it hits him. The tracks stand out, because for one thing, they go both to and from the basement, so either someone walked from the basement to somewhere else and back again – or from somewhere else, to the basement, and back again. If it's the latter, then that means that someone might have survived. And the second thing that stands out is that they're not coming from the entrance, like all the others. These tracks veer off to the side.

"What are you looking at?" Max asks, from behind him. Her voice wavers, like she's holding back emotions. Steve doesn't answer, just points at the tracks. She frowns, but when he starts to follow them he hears her trail after him.

When they get to a door – a metal one – Steve reaches for the door handle and finds that it's unlocked. He doesn't know what he'll find when he opens it, so he pushes Max behind him. He didn't have to worry. The door opens to another staircase, a spiral one this time, leading down.

"Stay here," he says, and when Max opens her mouth to protest he reaches into his pocket and hands her the key to the car. "*Stay here*. You're the backup."

"Fine," she says mulishly, but doesn't look like she's going to argue further. They've been through too much to not have learned the value of having backup.

Steve starts descending the stairs. He ends up in a short corridor, which he can barely see the end of, because there are no windows and no sources of light except the open door at the top of the stairs. Vaguely, he can make out the shape of a door at the end.

The door opens out into ... an underground room, much like the other one they were just in, but this one is smaller and has a ramp coming down on the other end. There is daylight coming in from it, so it's open to the outside. Some kind of underground loading dock, maybe, for cargo or deliveries. It's empty, but there are tire tracks in the dust on the floor. There are two doorways, one on either side. No doors, just wide openings. Steve picks one at random, because he might as well now that he's here. The first one leads to a storage area – one side of the room is stacked with old pallets, but the room is otherwise empty.

The other one, though ... He hasn't even reached it before he lets out a gasp, because he can see into the other room and there's a car there. It takes a second for it to register with him, that he *recognizes* that car. That is Billy's Camaro!

But how? How is it here? Steve smashed into it two days ago – he watched it *burn*.

Walking into the room he finds that it mirrors the one he just came from, some kind of loading area. There's a ramp, which explains how the car could have gotten here, but it's darker in here because there is no light coming in from outside. There is also no other opening on the other side of the room, instead there seems to be a staircase leading up to another metal door.

Steve walks closer to the car. It's crashed – the windshield is broken and the front of it is dented. He wonders if it crashed with Billy still on the hood, and if so – how much Billy suffered before he was flayed. The thought makes him grimace.

When he takes a closer look, he realizes that something is off about it. First of all, there are absolutely no signs of fire from when it crashed and burned at the mall, so he figures that maybe there are two Camaros; one that was destroyed at the mall, and one that he raced a week ago. That would explain how there were no marks on it

when Steve went to check it at the pool the day after. But that doesn't make sense either, because if that was true then this car should have a burgundy stripe down its side, from when it tried to run Steve off the road. But there isn't. Nor is there any peels of paint on the back, from the BMW slamming into its back tires.

Walking around the front of the car to try to figure out what's going on, he doesn't see the bundle at the bottom of the stairs, at first. When he does, he only vaguely recognizes its shape as something human-like, and doesn't react for a breath or two.

When it finally registers just what he's looking at, he feels his throat constrict around a yell.

There's a *person* there, lying on his side, his back to the room. Steve's already running, falling to his knees next to the person, grabbing his shoulder and turning him over.

He doesn't know what he's expecting; a dead body, maybe, or a monster of some kind. What he's *not* expecting is *Billy fucking Hargrove*, who Steve saw *get impaled* the day before yesterday. Who Steve saw *die*, but who is now obviously alive, by the way he gasps for breath and scrambles away from Steve's hold.

"Max!" Steve yells, without second thought. He turns his head and aims his next shout at the opening behind him, unwilling to take his eyes off Billy for a single second. "*Max!!*"

Billy is absolutely filthy. He's pale and bruised, and there's dried blood on his face. He's unshaved, with chapped lips and bruise-like shadows under his eyes, and his hair is tangled and unwashed. He's in jeans and a stained red shirt, and wearing a leather jacket. The same leather jacket that he had on when Steve saw him a week ago, when he was staring at Steve from the hood of a speeding car with terror in his eyes.

The same terror is there, now. "Get away from me," he rasps, and his voice sounds as if he's been gurgling broken glass. Steve doesn't notice until now that Billy's backing up, is trying to get away from him. But he doesn't get very far, because there are –

There are *chains* around his wrists, shackling him to the railing of the staircase. His wrists are dark with dried blood and bruising.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” Steve says, holding his hands up. Realizing – too late – that he’s still holding the crowbar, when Billy tries to shield himself with his bound hands while letting out a hoarse cackle.

Steve hears Billy say “Fucking finally,” which makes his heart clench painfully, and then he hears running steps coming closer. There’s a strangled gasp from behind him, and then Max – because of course it is Max – shoves past him and throws herself at her brother. Billy shrinks back, or tries to, the soles of his shoes scraping against the floor, but then Max’s arms are around his torso and she’s burrowing her face into his chest.

And Billy stills.

Max lets out a loud sob and clutches at him as if he’ll disappear if she doesn’t hold on, and the terror on Billy’s face bleeds away, morphs into ... confusion. Slowly, he pulls one hand down – and has to stretch the other one up, to be able to reach – and touches her hair. Max wails into his shirt.

“M-Max?” His eyes find Steve’s from over Max’s head. He swallows, runs a tongue over dry lips. “Harrington?”

And that’s when it hits; Billy is *alive*.

“Oh fuck,” Steve breathes, dropping the crowbar to the floor with a clang.

Billy winces at the sound. “You ... you died.” His voice is wrecked. Like he’s been screaming for the past week, or maybe not talked at all.

Steve stifles a hysteric giggle, because this is *insane*. “No, *you* died!”

Max chooses this moment to sit up. Her hands are on Billy’s face, running down to his shoulders, up his arms – checking for injuries, Steve realizes, and feels dumb for not having done it already – and when they reach his chained wrists she looks away from her brother’s face to glare at the chains. She yanks at them a little and then turns

her glare at Steve.

“Help me get these off!”

One more thing Steve should have already tried to do, probably – but in his defense he’s still reeling from the shock of finding Billy here, alive. He drops to his knees next to the both of them and takes a closer look at the chains. There are goddamn *padlocks* keeping them in place, and he irrationally starts looking around. He spots a couple of empty water bottles halfway under the stairs – and suddenly realizes that it’s Sunday, and that the monster died on Friday, and that no one has probably been here since then and *when was the last time Billy had anything to drink?*

“What are you doing?” Max says, looking at him as if he’s grown a second head.

“Looking for the ... key ...” Saying it out loud makes it sound ridiculous, because who would leave the key within reach?

“In the lock,” Billy rasps. “He broke it off.”

“Who did?” Max asks, as Steve grabs Billy’s wrist to peer into the keyhole of the closest lock. Just like he said, there’s a broken-off key in it. Steve swears.

“The copy,” Billy says. “It had my face. Looked just like me.” He coughs, and groans. “Sounded like me. *Acted* ... like me.” He winces, looks at Max. “I’m so sorry. I tried to stop him. Stop all of it.”

Several things fall into place, suddenly, and the air rushes out of Steve’s lungs. It wasn’t Billy who died at the mall. Maybe it wasn’t even Billy on the hood of the Camaro. And Steve has to know, “How long have you been here?”

Billy looks like he has to think about it. He blinks, slowly, licks his lips again. “Saturday?”

“Yesterday?” Steve asks, before the penny drops. “Wait, *last* Saturday?” Then, “Was it you, on the Camaro?”

Billy nods. “I thought you died.”

Max looks between them, obviously not knowing what's going on, but all she does is move closer so that her arm is pressed up against Billy's. It seems to soothe them both.

"When was the last time you had anything to drink?" Steve asks, nodding to the bottles.

Billy huffs out an unamused laugh. "Yesterday?"

"When was the last time you ate?"

Leaning his head on his arm, Billy shrugs. "Don't know." He frowns. "Before I came here."

That's a week ago. Steve files it away and asks, "Are you hurt anywhere?" and it's not until he's said it that he realizes what a stupid question that is. "Never mind." He stands up and addresses Max. "We have to get him out of here. Neil's truck, does it have any tools in it?"

Billy stiffens at the mention of Neil, and Steve could *kick* himself. He hopes that he can just let it slide, and leave that particular discussion for later, but to his absolute horror tears well up in Billy's eyes and he swallows hard. Max notices, and waves a hand to get his attention. "What's wrong? Billy, what's ...?"

"He's dead," Billy says, voice too flat to match the anguish on his face. "Dad. He's dead." And then he ... breaks. There's no other word for it. His face crumples and a sob is ripped out of him. Max is quick to throw her arms around him, even as she turns her head and mouths at Steve to go.

Steve, uncomfortable in the face of big bad Billy Hargrove breaking down, backs away. He leaves the siblings there to deal with ... well. The loss of a family member, he guesses. He wouldn't be any good there anyway; would just put his foot in it and say the wrong thing. But look for tools, he can do. He jogs back through the steel works and back out to the truck, and checks all of it for something useful. He finds nothing, and mentally curses the late Neil Hargrove. Who the fuck have a truck without a tool box?

The only useful thing he finds is a Kit Kat, a leftover from their improvised breakfast. It's mushy under his fingers after having been left in the car, but he grabs it and books it back to the room where he left Max and Billy.

"No tools," he calls from outside the room when he gets back, to give them time to collect themselves. Both of them have clearly been crying by now, but Steve's eyes aren't entirely dry either so he's not going to draw attention to it. "I'm gonna have to go and get someone to help."

Max's eyes widen as if she's just realizing something, and she throws herself at her discarded backpack and starts rifling through it. She emerges with the walkie-talkie in one hand and the knife in the other. When she approached a wide-eyed Billy with the knife, intent on attacking the padlocks, Steve intervenes because he can hear Billy's panicked breathing from where he's standing.

"That won't work," he says, and plucks the knife out of her hand. She frowns, but then gets a good look at Billy and looks a bit chastised. Instead she takes the walkie-talkie and starts fiddling with it.

While she curses at the thick concrete walls and wanders off towards the ramp to get a better signal, Steve puts the knife back in the backpack and takes Max's place next to Billy on the floor. He awkwardly hands him the smushed up Kit Kat, and ignores the way Billy's hands shake when he takes it.

"Thank you." It's so low that Steve almost didn't hear it.

"Sorry we didn't find you sooner," Steve says, just to have something to say. And as he says it, it hits him – it was pure chance that they found him. If Steve hadn't seen those tracks and decided to follow them, they would have unknowingly left him here to die. From starvation, dehydration. A harsh breath is punched out of him at the thought. "I'm just ... I'm sorry."

"No," Billy says, with a mouth full of chocolate. The wrapping crinkles between his fingers; Steve can hear it, but doesn't look at him. Figures he owes the guy enough, at least, to not stare at him while he eats. "You found me. I ... I didn't think anyone would."

Thought I'd die here, too."

"You almost did," Steve says. And then the words sink in. "Wait, 'too'?" He turns, and looks at the guy next to him. "What do you mean, 'die here, too'?"

Billy has eaten half the Kit Kat – bitten it off instead of snapping the pieces, like some kind of savage – and is licking his lips, visibly trying to hold back from scarfing down the rest. He's leaning against the stairs, as if he hasn't got the energy to keep himself upright without it. "I was ... there, at the mall," he says. "Kinda. I thought I died there." And then, quieter, "It felt like it."

He turns tired eyes to Steve's. "It's been ... It's been a long week, Harrington."

And Steve can't help but snort at that, frankly, *massive* understatement. Doves of people dead, a giant monster from the Upside Down wreaking havoc in the new mall, a secret Russian base far below Hawkins. Drugs, portals, torture. Possessed people, possessed *cars*, and – apparently – body (maybe even car) doubles.

"Yeah, man," he says and leans back against the stairs next to Billy, listening as Max finally gets a hold of someone on her walkie-talkie and starts yelling into it excitedly. "You can say that again."

It's been one *hell* of a long week.

Author's Note:

The story is fully written, and will be posted with one chapter a day, so I have time to re-read it to check for mistakes.